DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 265 CE 084 414

AUTHOR	Whiteman, Jo Ann M.
TITLE	Supporting the Adult Learner in an Online Environment.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	16p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Persistence; Adult Learning; *Adult Students; *Ancillary School Services; Community Colleges; Computer Literacy; *Computer Mediated Communication; *Distance Education; Marketing of Education; *Nontraditional Students; Online Systems; School Holding Power; Student Attitudes; *Student College Relationship; Technical Assistance; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

A growing number of community college students no longer come to campus. The Internet is a catalyst for what many believe will be an explosion in distance and distributed education. More older, part-time, working students than ever before are attending higher education. They do not want a traditional relationship with their colleges. They want to be treated as customers; they want service, convenience, and quality control. If colleges want to market online learning, they must review the support extended to the adult in an online environment. As adults enter higher learning, many seek a kind of academic redemption and re-construction of their life and sense of self. Their experience in the community college affirms both their sense of limitations and their confidence that they can succeed. Many adults are unprepared in math, reading, or writing skills necessary to perform college-level work. Combined with new technologies, this may create uncertainties and discouragement. Many adult learners need alternate intake, learning, and service options because of life situations. Those without an understanding of technology requirements in distance and online courses benefit from initial and continuing technical support. Community colleges should also provide educational services available any time and place. (15 references) (YLB)

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ED 473 265

Supporting the Adult Learner in an Online Environment

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Abstract

This paper is an overview into understanding the ways in which the support system at the Community College can assist the adult learners enrolled in online classes make sense of their community college experience. Can the adult learner view the experience as a convenient second chance, in which they are able, with the support of the college, to make up for past educational transgressions, through the construction of new hopes and dreams for the future? Is there an adult online learning market niche? What are some of the practical needs of the adult learner? Does higher education see the adult learner as a customer?

Review of Literature

Dirkx (Dirkx, Smith & Amey, 2001) states that to the adult learner the community college experience represents a chance to start over, to make up for past transgressions, to work toward something more satisfying or fulfilling (Cooper & Henschke, 2001). A quality education helps students make meaningful connections with the content as well as the learning environment (Cross, 1999). Further Levine (1998) notes that these older, part-time, working students want to be treated like customers. They want a relationship like they have with their bank, their gas company, and their supermarket (Levine, 1998).

The 21st century workplace can be characterized by unprecedented employment churn, which is making a potential student out of every worker and is transforming the community colleges into labor's first line of defense against skill obsolescence. As evidenced by the statistics from the United States Department of Labor the service industry continues to gain ground as the manufacturing industry declines (Meisenheimer, 1998). In an environment with this level of churn and organizational and managerial transformation, where the median age is in the mid-thirties, and where adults represent nearly 50% of college students, a growing number of learners are turning to community colleges for their learning needs (Klor de Alva, 1999). These learners want the convenience of learning anytime, anywhere (Mariani, 2001 & Green, 2000). At the same time, many are unprepared in math, reading or writing skills necessary to perform college-level work (Boylan, 1999).

Milliron and Miles (2000) challenges higher education institutions to strategically move the customer relationship to a higher level, an integrated technology-enabled educational infrastructure that can enhance learning by developing better, more lasting relationships with students. Although they believe that most colleges and universities

would shun a strategic plan dubbed Customer Relationship Management; the savvy educators are recognizing the Learner Relationship Management (LRM). Students, faculty, staff and communities will come to expect the outcomes that an LRM approach promises. They expect to have a variety of options—Web, phone, or in person—to review programs and services; apply for admissions; register for classes; take course; access syllabi; check grades; communicate with faculty, staff, or peers; and access state-of-the-art research materials. Moreover, the student expects all of these services to be supported by an integrated data system that shares information seamlessly and securely (Milliron & Miles, 2000).

Introduction

A growing number of today's college students no longer come to campus. The Internet has become a catalyst for what many on campus, in corporations and at "dot.coms" believe will be an explosion in distance and distributed learning. The competition for students is moving from physical place into cyberspace: established institutions as well as new, for-profit providers are developing business plans and strategic alliances that amend, extend, protect, and defend what some view as new market opportunities.

There are going to be more students than ever before and higher education enrollment is projected to increase from an estimated 13.9 million in 1995 to 16.1 million by 2007. Traditional is not a word that will describe many of these students. According to the U.S. Department of Education, by 1995 44 percent of all college students were over 25 years old, 54 percent were working, 56 percent were female, and 43 percent were attending college part time. These older, part-time, working students want something different from the traditional relationship with their colleges. They want to be treated as

customers. They want service, convenience and quality control. If the institutions want to market online learning, it is imperative that they review the support extended to the adult in an online environment.

Transformation in Today's Workforce

Since 1991 the manufacturing workforce has declined. Employment data for 1991 to 2001 based on an establishment survey show annual average employment in services growing in every year to reach 41.0 million in 2001. This represents an increase of 44.6 percent. Employment for the economy as a whole, in contrast, increased 22.1 percent from its trough in 1991 to 2001 (see Appendices A & B for complete proof). The occupational characteristics in the services industry include professional specialty and service occupations. These are the largest job categories, with each group making up nearly a quarter of industry employment.

> "Professional occupations include such jobs as engineers, architects, computer scientists, natural scientists, physicians, registered nurses, therapists, teachers, lawyers, social workers and clergy. These occupations have especially large concentration in industries such as engineering, architectural and surveying services; educational services; hospitals; computer and data processing services; research and testing services; legal services; social services; and religious organizations. Services industries such as beauty shops, building services, detective and protective services, hotels and motels, health services, and social services employ a large number of workers in service occupations, which include security guards, maids, janitors, barbers, cosmetologists, child care providers, and health aids.

> The services industry also employs a large number of workers in administrative support occupations, especially in legal services, accounting, auditing, and bookkeeping services, physicians' offices, and personnel supply services. Executive, administrative, and managerial occupations account for a relatively large proportion of jobs in labor unions, accounting, auditing, and bookkeeping services, and management and public relations firms. Another large occupational category within the services industry is technicians and related support. Technicians include such jobs as dental hygienists, licensed practical nurses, laboratory and radiological technicians, electrical and electronic technicians, drafting and surveying technicians, chemical and biological technicians, computer programmers, and legal assistants" (Meisenheimer, 1998).

Further the percentage of skilled workers in the workforce has increased as the explosion of information technology and the Internet, is projected to increase (Sullivan, 2000). This disruption in the U.S. labor force and in its educational and training needs, reflects the fact that a great shift is taking place from a reliance on physical capital, fueled by financial capital to a focus on human capital as the primary productive asset (Klor de Alva, 1999).

Markets and Technology

As the work market changes our institutions of higher learning must keep in step with these changes. What are the characteristics of the students that will be attending institutions of higher education "According to the U.S. Department of Education, by 1995 44 percent of all college students were over 25 years old, 54 percent were working, 56 percent were female and 43 percent were attending college part time. Over half of all

freshmen and sophomores attend community colleges. In 1997, more than 76 million American adults—40 percent of the adult population—participated in one or more adult education activities, up from 32 percent in 1991" (McClenney, 1998).

At the same time the present and future technologies will throw great light on the academic enterprise. "The time is rapidly approaching when our children and grandchildren will wonder how we, without interactive capabilities, ever learned anything at all. By the end of 1998, an estimated 80 percent of U.S. public schools will be online" (McClenney, 1998). As we observe any college campus today there is evidence of the presence of computing and information technology in the college curriculum. There are computers in the library, students and faculty with notebook computers, and web site addresses on course syllabi. Today's college students whether they are the traditional undergraduates directly from high school, single parents enrolled part-time in community colleges, adults returning for a single course, or an over 40-year old displaced executive come to college to learn with and learn about computers and information technology (Green, 2000).

It is further noticeable that a growing number of today's college students no longer come to campus. Technologies have become a catalyst for distance and distributed learning; thereby creating more course and options for learners anytime and anyplace. Competition for students is moving from the physical place to cyberspace. "Established institutions as well as new, for-profit providers are in the early stages of developing business plans and strategic alliances that amend, extend, protect, and defend what some view as entitlement markets and others see as new market opportunities" (Green, 2000).

> "Using technology to free learning from the limits of time or space makes education available to more people. Some of those already in the labor force may find distance learning the only option for upgrading skills, finishing a degree, or pursuing another degree. Distance learning helps many adult learners balance the demands of work and family with their pursuit of more education" (Mariani, 2001).

Andragogy Application

In a study by Cooper & Henschke (2001) andragogy is defined as a code word for identifying the education and learning of adults. Henschke further emphasizes "in preparing educators of adults, andragogy becomes a way of being or an attitude of mind, and needs to be modeled/exemplified by the professor. Otherwise, if we are not modeling what we are teaching, we are teaching something else" (Cooper & Henschke, 2001).

As adults enter higher learning many are seeking a kind of "academic redemption, re-constructing their lives and their sense of self" (Dirkx, Smith & Amey, 2001). Being in college fosters new hopes and dreams in this redemption process. Their experience in the community college affirms both their sense of limitations and their confidence that they can in fact succeed. Purposes and goals start to take shape and the confidence continues to build (Dirks, Smith & Amey, 2001). At the same time, many are unprepared in math, reading or writing skills necessary to perform college-level work (Boylan, 1999). This combined with new technologies may create uncertainties and discouragement. In Cross (1999) a conclusion is made that quality education is about helping students make meaningful connections with the content as well as others in the

learning environment (Cross, 1999). "In learning with technology, the connections to content, context and community can be powerful" (Milliron & Miles, 2000).

Service and Support

"Among surveys of incoming traditional-age freshman in higher education, more than 75 percent report significant experience with information technology. This NetGeneration, the post-baby boom echoes of young people bring their expectations for digital access to work, play and school" (Milliron, 2001). Many older students; however, are returning to college to gain technology skills to improve their career options, gain access to information and services in the 21 century digital economy. Further, there are pressures from government, companies and industry, as well as various sectors of education to provide organizations and students for life in the Digital Age (Milliron, 2001).

In the business world we understand how it works. Many of us belong to frequent flyer programs with airlines, hotels and shopping programs at the local grocery store. What do these programs have in mind? Their goal is to create longstanding relationships with customers. They move from prospective leads to loyal consumers. Have you ever taken an extra leg on a flight, turned down a competing rate at a hotel or drive a few miles further just to deal with a preferred grocery store? Why do we do this? We know that our actions are induced by quality, service and personal attention that make it worth all of the extra effort (Milliron, 2001).

> "The current version of this relationship-centered business strategy is called Customer Relationship Management (CRM), one of the hottest economic concepts today, with sales of CRM tools reaching almost $5 billion this year and expected to double by 2003" (Milliron, 2001).

In Milliron (2001) an extension of the CRM model to higher education is called the Learner Relationship Management model (LRM). Colleges using this model ask questions such as: How are students brought into the institution? How do students learn? How do they receive services? Can students apply for admissions online? Can students ask questions about schedules over the phone? Do students have to apply for financial aid in Person? Can they access an online syllabus? Can they call for help from a tutoring center? Can they check grades online? Can they call a career counselor or explore career options at the career center? Finally, is there a tutoring center for online students? Is there a help desk telephone number for online students?

Many adult learners need alternate intake, learning and service options because of their life situations. Further community college students may need a particular learning modality to succeed because of their lack of academic, technology or social skills.

> "Research suggests that if we enroll under prepared students in online classes without orientation or personal interaction, their likelihood of failure is high. But, if we start these students out with human-intensive in-person intake, learning experiences, and support services, and include the goal of helping them effectively utilize other touch points—to become more hardy learners—they can eventually develop the ability to learn well in multiple modalities. Put simply, through the effective use of LTM, we can foster the development of lifelong learners for the Digital Age" (Milliron, 2001).

Levine (1998) summarizes his findings from several studies of American undergraduate students. They note that these older, part-time, working students want to be treated like customers. According to the studies, they want terrific service,

convenience, and quality control. They want classes 24 hours a day with in-class parking, if possible. They do not want health services or bowling leagues. They do not want to pay for anything they are not using (Levine, 1998).

Conclusion

Students should have an understanding of technology requirements before enrolling in distance learning courses; however, in reality some do not. In many cases this is the adult learner. These students may benefit from initial technical support by way of an orientation as well as a continuing form of technical support to resolve problems that arise. This becomes more important when the course heavily relies on computers. If you take an online course with lectures and discussions delivered via streaming video and the software fails to do the job, your learning stops dead. Having someone to call for help in these situations is a definite plus.

In addition to online learning, there is a demand for educational services that is available anytime and anyplace. There will be an expectation for the institution to perform and be accountable for producing a return on the student's investment. Systems should be centered on learners, far more customer-oriented, responding to heightened demands for responsiveness, convenience and flexibility (McClenney, 1998). Institutions must develop their infrastructures thoughtfully as they keep focused on the learner. The lifelong adult learner is in fact the customer and must be provided with their wants, needs and educational outcomes.

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Appendix A

Employment and unemployment in manufacturing

Year	Employment (thousands)	Unemployment rate (percent)
1991	18,406	7.3
1992	18,104	7.8
1993	18,075	7.2
1994	18,321	5.6
1995	18,524	4.9
1996	18,495	4.8
1997	18,675	4.2
1998	18,805	3.9
1999	18,552	3.6
2000	18,473	3.6
2001	17,695	5.2

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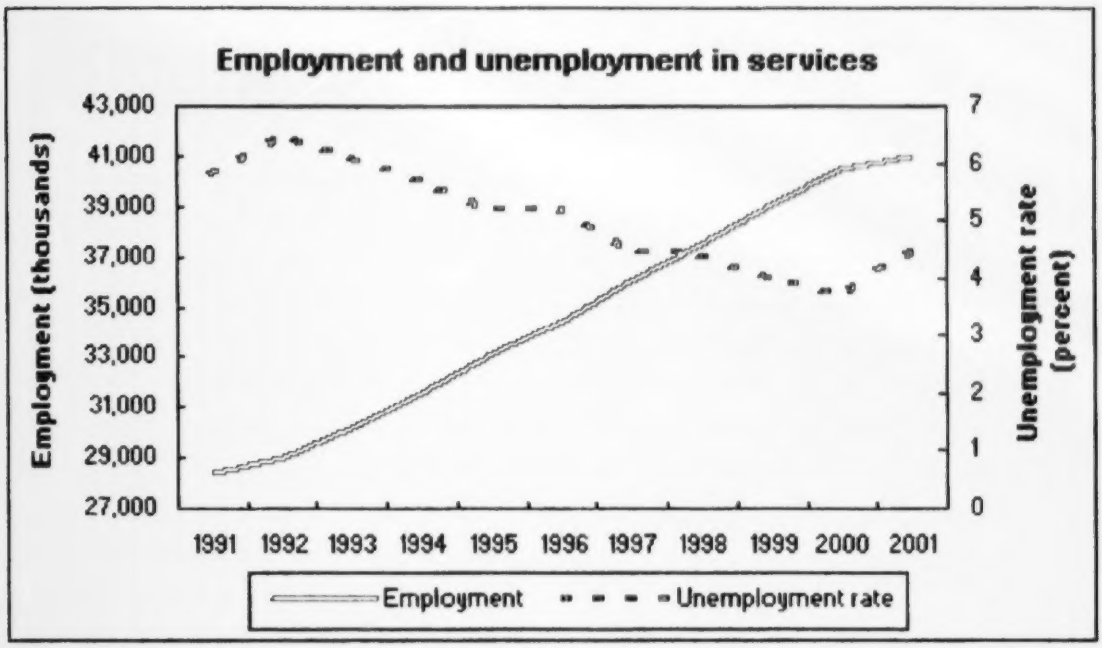
Appendix B



Employment and unemployment in services

Year	Employment (thousands)	Unemployment rate (percent)
1991	28,336	5.8
1992	29,052	6.5
1993	30,197	6.1
1994	31,579	5.7
1995	33,117	5.2
1996	34,454	5.2
1997	36,040	4.5
1998	37,533	4.4
1999	39,055	4.0
2000	40,457	3.7
2001	40,970	4.5

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